

Province ramping up child-care projects ^[1]

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The B.C. government will create an additional 161 child-care spaces in the capital region this year, with another 89 promised for next year and 212 by 2023.

Katrine Conroy, minister of children and family development, said on Friday that the province is investing in 11 projects to create the new spaces in the capital region. Seven of those are the result of partnerships with local school districts.

Conroy read a book to children at Cordova Bay Elementary School in Saanich before making her announcement. The school's on-campus Caboose Club will expand by 20 spaces as part of the 161 new spaces to be created this year.

"Adding child care to school grounds is a win for everyone," Conroy said. "It gives kids a smoother transition into elementary school and offers convenience for parents."

The new projects in the capital region include more than 300 child-care spaces on school grounds, she said.

"And that's thanks to the Greater Victoria and Saanich school districts ... we couldn't do these school spaces without [them]," she said, adding: "We're hoping your forward thinking will rub off on other school districts across the province."

Education Minister Rob Fleming said having preschool and school-age siblings in the same building is a great benefit for families and children and communities.

"[But] the real benefits that interest our ministry is how much better kids do when they arrive in kindergarten if they're involved in high-quality childcare at a younger age," he said. "Some of the pre-kindergarten programs that we are announcing today are going to be fantastic transitions for kids."

A change to the School Act given royal assent this week will allow school districts to directly create child-care spaces and operate not-for-profit before- and after-school care.

"That is a game-changer, quite frankly, in terms of being able to use library spaces and other parts of schools for before-and-after school care for typically five- to 12-year-old kids," Fleming said. "We're expecting we'll see thousands of more before- and after-school spaces."

Since the government launched the New Spaces Fund in July 2018, almost 1,400 new, affordable licensed child-care spaces have been funded in the regional district, according to the province.

However, prospective child-care operator Jennifer Delaney said recent changes in the application deadlines for New Spaces funding mean projects could be delayed as much as six months.

Delaney fears she will have to forgo the funding if she wants to open her Nurture Early Childhood Education Centre in Vic West this summer. She knows of others who are also affected.

Previously, New Spaces applicants for capital funding for the creation of new child-care spaces could have their applications reviewed and get an answer within eight weeks.

Increased demand for the funding, however, has created concern in government about ensuring spaces are fairly allocated based on need across the entire province.

The government wanted to ensure the funding was going to the communities that needed it most, said Conroy. Municipalities are also submitting planning grants showing where needs are, said Conroy, "so that's why we've gone to a two-stream process."

The new deadlines for applications are Feb. 10 and Aug. 10, said Delaney.

On Feb. 25, Delaney submitted her funding request for \$71,000. The whole project will cost \$95,517.

"Under the previous intake procedure, my application would be under review right now, and I would be anticipating a response sometime

this month or next,” said Delaney in an email. Now, her application won’t even be considered until sometime between May 12 and July 31, and she won’t get a response until Aug. 10, said Delaney, who wants to begin renovations to have her centre opened by the summer.

“I am in the impossible position where I have to choose to either halt the renovation work until August/September and open the centre in November, in the hopes that I will receive funding, or personally finance the whole project with no support from the New Spaces Fund and open our doors by June.”

Delaney has started a petition asking the province to revert to the old New Spaces Fund application deadlines.

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